

# Fightback

*Struggle, Solidarity, Socialism*



ACCESSIBILITY  
ISSUE



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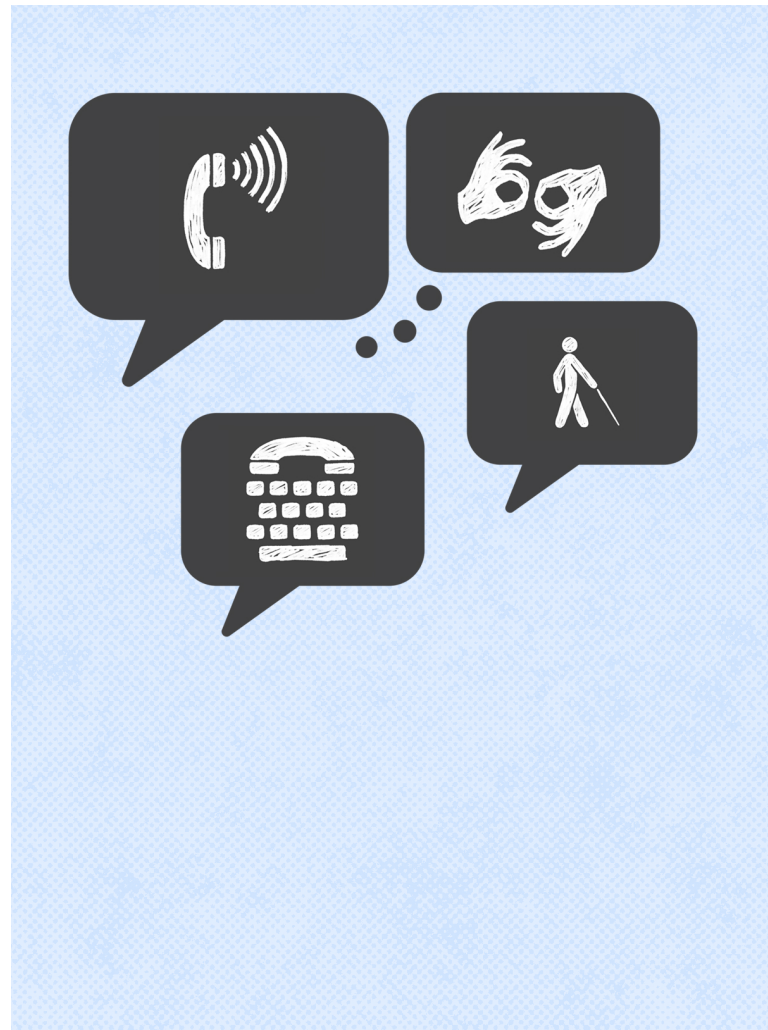
# EDITORIAL

“Nothing about us without us”. This slogan from the disability justice movement could be a pretty good slogan for the movement for a post-capitalist society altogether.

Just as the socialist movement argues that working-class power will bring about a better world for all of humanity – and as feminism argues that men will be liberated too by the liberation of women and all the other genders – the term *Accessibility* makes it clear that what we are looking for is not just enabling the participation in society of people with physical, psychological or other impairments. To do so would enable the right-wing argument against “affirmative action” to make sense – that such initiatives are “pandering to a minority at the expense of the [able-bodied] majority”.

The obvious retort, of course, is that every single person is only “temporarily able-bodied” at best. If illness or accident don’t impact upon us, eventually old age will. But the articles written and reprinted in this issue take up, again and again, the idea that a commitment to Accessibility mean improving the world *for everyone*, no matter their physical or psychological capabilities. To give a basic example: ramps instead of stairs leading up to buildings make them more accessible for people who use wheelchairs. But they also make them easier to use for parents pushing prams, people bringing heavy equipment into or out of the building, and so on.

When we set out to create a *Fightback* issue on the subject of Accessibility, we decided to push the definition out beyond what might have been the usual idea of what this word means – that is, including people with physical and sensory impairments in both wider society, and the social movements which seek to build a better society. To position my own work in this article: I am currently able-bodied, although I suffer from depression and anxiety (not uncommon side-effects of growing up queer and working-



class). So in editing this issue I enlisted the help of my wife Tricia Hall, who has lived with chronic pain for years, as well as working as a teacher at a mental-health arts trust. In addition, Tricia and I are now parents to a feisty, independent two-year-old.

From this perspective, we live these questions of Accessibility in our daily life. We have experience in how the capitalist economy (despite its rhetoric of self-improvement via education and training) systematically excludes people who cannot tolerate on a physical or sensory level the “normal” ways of being at work. Consequently, most of us find ourselves having to grapple with the social welfare bureaucracies, who seem to deliberately want to humiliate, belittle and smash the confidence of those who come to them for





aid, so that they will “disappear” off their books... one way or another. Issues of accessibility in housing and public transport come very much to the fore when you have a combination of a small child, chronic pain, a single full-time income and no private car.

High suicide rates are symptoms of a world which tells you that if you can’t “fit in” with how things are done traditionally, and which “most people” can put up with, then tough – enjoy your exclusion and hunger. The growing Right-wing populist movements, and their Fascist fringe, oppose Accessibility for exactly the same reason they oppose every reform made to include more people in effective participation in society. They support barriers and divisions because they really think that they are part of the “superior” caste or race of people, and they want to

build barriers to preserve privileges.

In contrast, more than 200 years of the working-class movement have shown that only unconditional solidarity brings our side victory. *Any* barriers which privilege one group of working people over another – race, gender, religion or physical ability – make our struggle harder to win.

We hope this issue will provoke thought and debate within the movement.





# TEN PRINCIPLES OF DISABILITY JUSTICE

by Sins Invalid

*Sins Invalid is a performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and queer and gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized. Our performance work explores the themes of sexuality, embodiment and the disabled body. Conceived and led by disabled people of color, we develop and present cutting-edge work where normative paradigms of “normal” and “sexy” are challenged, offering instead a vision of beauty and sexuality inclusive of all individuals and communities.*

*We define disability broadly to include people with physical impairments, people who belong to a sensory minority, people with emotional disabilities, people with cognitive challenges, and those with chronic/severe illness. We understand the experience of disability to occur within any and all walks of life, with deeply felt connections to all communities impacted by the medicalization of their bodies, including trans, gender variant and intersex people, and others whose bodies do not conform to our culture(s)’ notions of “normal” or “functional.” See more at <http://www.sinsinvalid.org>*



1. **Intersectionality.** “We do not live single issue lives” –Audre Lorde. Ableism, coupled with white supremacy, supported by capitalism, underscored by heteropatriarchy, has rendered the vast majority of the world “invalid.”
2. **Leadership of those most impacted.** “We are led by those who most know these systems.” – Aurora Levins Morales
3. **Anti-capitalist politics.** In an economy that sees land and humans as components of profit, we are anti-capitalist by the nature of having non-conforming body/minds.
4. **Commitment to cross-movement organizing.** Shifting how social justice movements understand disability and contextualize ableism, disability justice lends itself to politics of alliance.
5. **Recognizing wholeness.** People have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity. Each person is full of history and life experience.
6. **Sustainability.** We pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long term. Our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation.
7. **Commitment to cross-disability solidarity.** We honor the insights and participation of all of our community members, knowing that isolation undermines collective liberation.
8. **Interdependence.** We meet each others’ needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that state solutions inevitably extend into further control over lives.
9. **Collective access.** As brown, black and queer-bodied disabled people we bring flexibility and creative nuance that go beyond able-bodied/minded normativity, to be in community with each other.
10. **Collective liberation.** No body or mind can be left behind – only mobbing together can we accomplish the revolution we require.



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# THE RIGHT NOT TO WORK: POWER AND DISABILITY

by Sunny Taylor



*Sunny Taylor, Self-Portrait With Manatee (2014)*



I have a confession to make: I do not work. I am on SSI.<sup>1</sup> I have very little work value (if any), and I am a drain on our country's welfare system. I have another confession to make: I do not think this is wrong, and to be honest, I am very happy not working. Instead I spend the majority of my time doing the activity I find the most rewarding and valuable, painting.

Due to my disability (arthrogryposis multiplex congenita), I paint holding the paintbrush in my mouth instead of my hands; I use an electric wheelchair for mobility. When I first realized that due to my impairment I might be unable to work in a traditional job, I was worried about my financial future, but it never occurred to me to worry about my life's value as a "non-productive" citizen. However, I think that I am unusually fortunate to have been raised with a belief in my own inherent value, because many disabled people seem to carry a deep "non-working guilt," even if they are successful in other areas.

## Models of disability

Disability is most commonly perceived as a personal tragedy, isolated and spontaneous, and so rarely worthy of a second thought let alone headlines (unless as a human interest story). Disabled people are far from enjoying the advantages of social or economic equality, but the point is that they are far from even being seen as a deserving identity group. While issues regarding racial, gender, and sexual orientation equality are all at the forefront of political and social theory, disabled people are almost always left out of these conversations. The disabled are viewed with sympathy as victims of "bad luck" who will simply have to accept disadvantage as their lot in life, not as an identity group that is systematically discriminated against. Unlike sexism and racism, which are perceived to be significant social problems, disability falls under the social radar and disablism is not recognized as a damaging or even particularly serious

form of prejudice.

One fact that makes disability so hard to understand is that there is no single model of disability; the human body can be impaired in an almost infinite number of ways, and people of all walks of life can become impaired. "As with the population as a whole, disabled people are characterized by difference rather than normality: differences in terms of gender, minority ethnic background, sexual orientation, age abilities, religious beliefs, wealth, access to work and so on. Clearly, their situation cannot be understood or, indeed, transformed by any theory or policy which is based on conventional notions of normality and the existence of a single set of culturally dominant values."<sup>2</sup> The only thing impaired people have in common is their political disablement and the economic, behavioural, and emotional similarities that impairment can cause.

Despite advances, both in theory and in practice, disability rights remain some of the last to be thought about, and as a result are typically some of the first to be forgotten when it comes time for cutbacks or budget "reform." The disability movement has failed as of yet to convince people that our existence in society is valid and essential. The public remains unconvinced that our struggle is actually theirs as well; advocates for the disabled are *de facto* fighting for the rights of the elderly, and many of the services they are demanding will help their able-bodied counterparts as well, both directly (for example, when a worker become temporarily impaired or by providing able-bodied individuals with more options as they inevitably age) and indirectly (they may enjoy peace of mind because a loved one is living happily in their own home with the help of an attendant). We have failed to get our point across; but what is our point? Perhaps it is best expressed in the idea that disability is a political issue not a personal one.

<sup>1</sup> The Supplemental Security Income program (SSI) is administered by the Social Security Administration and pays benefits to individuals who are both poor and disabled.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (N.Y.: St Martin's Press, 1990).

## Disability and impairment

Disability theorists make this clear by making a subtle but significant distinction between disability and impairment. The state of being mentally or physically challenged is what they term being impaired; with impairment comes personal challenges and drawbacks in terms of mental processes and physical mobility. To be impaired is to be missing a limb or born with a birth defect; it is a state of embodiment. Being impaired is hard. Without a doubt, it makes things harder than if one is not impaired. However, more often than not, the individual accommodates for this impairment and adapts to the best of their ability. For example, I am impaired by arthrogryposis, which limits the use of my arms, but I make up for this in many ways by using my mouth.

Disability, in contrast, is the political and social repression of impaired people. This is accomplished by making them economically and socially isolated. Disabled people have limited housing options, are socially and culturally ostracized, and have very few career opportunities. The disabled community argues that these disadvantages are thus not due to impairment by its nature, but due to a cultural aversion to impairment, a lack of productive opportunity in the current economy for disabled people, and the multi-billion dollar industry that houses and “cares” for the disabled population that has developed as a consequence of this economic disenfranchisement. This argument is known as the social model of disability. Disablement is a political state and not a personal one and thus needs to be addressed as a civil rights issue.

Viewing disability in a materialistic framework demonstrates how this political repression functions. Take disability theorist Brendan Gleeson’s adaptation of the analysis of Karl Marx, who defined nature as existing prior to and independent of human experience, and yet simultaneously as something that “attains its qualities and meanings by means of a transformative relationship of human labor.” Nature exists outside society as an objective reality, but it is also used and

changed by humans to meet their needs. Marx used the notion of “two natures” to describe this historical transformation and he argued that this change was formed through human labor. Almost all of the terrestrial “natural world” has been somehow altered through human intervention, and nature is indissolubly connected to human society.

Marx used this analysis of nature to show how the capitalist mode of production “altered nature so as to deny for much of humanity their species potential.” Nature pre-exists social formations, but is itself evolving also, not only due to biological and ecological factors, but also through human intervention. Each human relates to nature through their own physical experience as gendered, as aged, and as abled, and each experience of embodiment should be seen as both historically and socially evolved through natural elements. The body is both a biological fact and cultural artifact; “the former constitutes a pre-social organic base upon which the latter takes form.”<sup>3</sup> Disability activists and theorists see impairment as equivalent to “first nature” and disability as an example of “second nature.”

Marx and later theorists have shown how capitalist development has privileged certain biological forms of embodiment (for example white able-bodied males). Because of this, it is important when trying to understand the impact of space on bodies (for instance inaccessible buildings and transportation), to consider who is forming (and has formed) spaces and who inhabits them. The extreme inaccessibility and alienation felt by impaired people may not be a natural consequence of their own personal embodiments in the twenty-first century, but instead a complex system of historical, cultural, and geographical discrimination that has evolved inside and alongside capitalism and that we now simply regard (and too frequently dismiss) as disability.

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<sup>3</sup> Brendan Gleeson, *Geographies of Disability* (London: Routledge Press, 1999).



## Employment and empowerment

A huge part of the stigma attached to being disabled is that due to disabled people's physical dependence, they are seen as burdens (because they can't work according to our current standardized economic system). The more impaired someone is the more of a burden they are. In actuality, the only reason that many people are a burden on their family and friends is that they have such limited options. People who try to live independently with the help of loved ones often find that it is next to impossible because the state has no independent living options and so the burden is indeed too great to take on individually. Thus many people, simply due to financial constraints, have no other option but to be put in an institution.

Much of the empowering rhetoric in disability movements is about becoming employed and about having equal access to mainstream society. Capitalism has at its root the idea of an individual's worth being intrinsically linked to their production value. Many, though by no means all, disabled people will never be good workers in the capitalist sense: if you cannot move or speak, it is hard to succeed in a mainstream career. There is a small but significant percentage of the disabled population that has "made it" and has achieved economic equality working as professionals, lawyers, artists, professors, and writers. They are a fortunate minority and the work they do is important. These opportunities have everything to do with class and are not open to all impaired individuals.

I, like many people, will never make a good waitress, secretary, factory worker, or bus driver (unless there were massive and expensive adaptations to the bus I was driving), the type of work open to people who lack higher education. It is hard to think of a vocation where my contribution would be desirable in a cost-benefit analysis. The minority of the impaired population that does have gainful employment are paid less than their able-bodied counterparts and are fired more often (and these statistics are more egregious for disabled minorities). To ensure

that employers are able to squeeze surplus value out of disabled workers, thousands are forced into dead-end and segregated jobs and legally paid below minimum wage (for example, in the case of "sheltered workshops" for those with developmental disabilities).<sup>4</sup> The condescension towards the workers in such environments is severe. Why should working be considered so essential that disabled people are allowed to be taken advantage of, and, moreover, expected to be grateful for such an "opportunity"?

Disabled people are brought up with the same cultural ideals and ambitions and dreams as their able-bodied counterparts; we too are indoctrinated to fetishize work and romanticize career and to see the performance of wage labor as the ultimate freedom. And yet, for the most part, we are denied access to this fantasy; many of us live on government aid or family support or even charity. Shouldn't we, of all groups, recognize that it is not work that would liberate us (especially not menial labor made accessible or greeting customers at Wal-Marts across America), but the right to not work and be proud of it? How would this shift in thinking affect the goals and attitude of those concerned with the rights of impaired people or the self-image of those who are impaired themselves?

This is not at all to say that disabled people should cease to be active or that they should retreat into their homes and do nothing (the main problem is already that we are too isolated). What I mean by the right to work is perhaps as much a shift in ideology or consciousness as it is a material shift. It is about our relation not only to labor but the significance of performing that labor, and to the idea that only through the performance of wage labor does the human being actually accrue value themselves. It is about cultivating a skeptical attitude regarding the significance of work, which should not be taken at face value as a sign of equality and enfranchisement, but should be analyzed more critically.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.accessiblesociety.org/topics/economicemployment/shelteredwksps.html>

## Disabled people in the movements

It is often surprising to me how often disabled people are excluded from leftist politics and media. Many disability movements have tried to join forces with other identity groups in the struggle for change. Disability has not made it into the canon of identity politics and as a result is frequently excluded from progressive struggles. We have been ignored and in fact shunned by women's movements (largely based around misunderstanding regarding the issue of abortion), racial movements, gay and lesbian activists, and to a large degree even workers' unions. As an example of the latter, the Service Employees International Union, in its attempts to save the jobs of its members who work at Laguna Honda, the world's largest nursing home, has argued that impaired people are invalids who must be institutionalized despite protests from disabled advocates.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, I think this proves that even the most culturally sensitive of people frequently choose not to look past a medical and charitable view of disability.

Disability is an obvious example of the need for fundamental structural reform and I am surprised that people who desire change have not more often reached out to our movement. We epitomize many ways in which our political and social systems need to change. We are often born out of war, financial inequality, and environmental degradation. My disability is a birth defect caused by a U.S. Air Force contractor that illegally polluted my neighborhood's ground water. They buried toxic chemicals near our community's wells for over forty years, but did not bother to remedy the situation even after awareness of the damage was raised; most likely this is because the area was inhabited by poor Latino families and residents of a local Indian reservation. Thousands of people died or became impaired due to the Air Force's negligence. Unfortunately, my case is not rare.

Being impaired or not being normal (which,

5 Marta Russell, "Stuck at the Nursing Home Door," *Ragged Edge Magazine*, <http://www.ragged-edge-mag.com/0100/a0100ft1.htm>; Bob Kafka, "Disability Rights Vs. Worker Rights," <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=47 & ItemID=4503>

as I have said, with the help of family and technology and with perseverance can be overcome) is not sexy by common standards and neither is dependence. The fact is that impairment reveals our interdependence and threatens our belief in our own autonomy. And this is where we return to work: the ultimate sign of an individual's independence.

Western culture has a very limited idea of what being useful to society is. People can be useful in ways other than monetarily. The individuals who I marched with may not have paying jobs, but they spend hours each day organizing protests and freeing people from lives in institutions. Isn't this a valuable way to spend one's time? Disabled people have to find meaning in other aspects of their lives and this meaning is threatening to our culture's value system. Though education, legislation, and technological developments may work to level the employment field for some impaired individuals, we should keep some fundamental insights from Marxist economic theory in mind, particularly the theory of surplus value, which dictates that higher profits result from the ability to pay less for labor power than the value imparted by the worker. The same rule that often excludes the impaired from the traditional workplace also exploits the able-bodied who have no other choice but to participate. The right not to work is an ideal worthy of the impaired and able-bodied alike.

*Edited version of article originally published at <https://monthlyreview.org/2004/03/01/the-right-not-to-work-power-and-disability/>*



# TOI ORA: MAKING THE ARTS ACCESSIBLE

by Tricia Hall



When we talk about accessibility too often the discussion ends with the basics of food and shelter. But to be a fully accessible society for all we need to consider people in a holistic manner. Providing for physical emotional and spiritual needs can mean different things to different people, and how easily people can get these needs met also varies.

For those who have experienced Mental Health or other issues, accessing something like the Arts comes well down the priority list after shelter, food, medications and other treatments, transportation – all things that cost money in our society. However, it is precisely access to arts and community that people find allows them to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. We need to recognise

the importance of having access to community – whether that is arts, sports, spiritual or something else, and that this is a fundamental human right for all.

For some years I have been a part of a community called Toi Ora, both as an artist, tutor and part of the strategic board. Toi Ora is an art space in central Auckland which provides classes across the spectrum of arts for people who have experienced Mental Health or substance abuse issues.

Toi Ora was set up in 1995 by a group of artists with lived experience of Mental Health issues who recognized that an important part of living well was finding something you liked doing and a community to support you to do it. Unlike so much of the health system, particularly those parts dealing with Mental Health, Toi Ora is not about what is wrong in people's lives, but rather what is right. People are artists, musicians, writers – not whatever label society or the system may have placed upon them.

## **How Toi Ora works**

Toi Ora provides a schedule of regular classes during term times in the visual arts, drama, music, creative writing and more. Members are encouraged to be part of running the studio in volunteer roles. The staff at Toi Ora have either their own personal experiences of unwellness, extensive training in mental health and/or the arts, or both. All tutors are practicing artists, writers or musicians.

Members do not pay to join Toi Ora, and professional-quality materials are provided. People who join are signed up for one or more classes and fill in an enrolment form for each term. When they first join, a staff person will give them an orientation to ensure they understand what is expected of them, including what is appropriate behaviour whilst using Toi Ora services.

Toi Ora's membership criteria are personal experience of mental unwellness, which means a diversity of members both with long-term illnesses, and those who have recently had their first episode of unwellness.

Members' artistic abilities also vary, and Toi Ora is able to cater for a range of levels from absolute beginners to established artists.

There is some provision for space for independent projects to take place alongside classes, and there is also usually at least one artist in residence supported by the Toi Ora Trust. When Toi Ora moved to its current premises in 2009, we acquired gallery space in which to showcase our members' artwork with regular exhibitions.

A large part of Toi Ora's funding comes from the Auckland District Health Board, which only covers the central part of Auckland – so we are not able to admit new members who live in the western or southern parts of the Super-City. The service has regular audits to ensure that the DHB is getting "value for money".

Other sources of funding have come through applying for philanthropic or other grants, usually for specific projects including the Express Yourself youth programme, October Gig, events promoting Mental Health Awareness Week, The Outsider Art Fair and more. Some of these have been organized in conjunction with groups or organisations such as Circability, Mapura studio, Mental Health Foundation, Clubhouse, Studio One Toi Tū and others within both Arts and Health fields.

## **Safety and accessibility**

It can sometimes be challenging to cater for the varied needs and abilities of members in such a way that Toi Ora remains accessible for all. Alongside Mental unwellness there is an element of risk, and Toi Ora has strong policy guidelines for managing this.

All members sign an agreement when they first join to adhere to these guidelines, and if staff notice someone showing signs of potential unwellness they will speak to that member to encourage them to take appropriate steps to look after themselves. Toi Ora is a supportive community, and while not specifically therapy oriented, sometimes people may find that emotional triggers may occur during their time in the studio or



classes. When this happens, either peers or staff will usually support the distressed person, and if necessary involve other support people if appropriate.

## Tricia's story

When I first came to Toi Ora around 2001, I was coming out of a period of ill health that had really shaken my confidence. I had dropped out of university and moved back in with my parents. Coming to a couple of classes a week at Toi Ora provided the beginnings of routine, a place to be, and understanding people to connect with.

Quite early in my time at Toi Ora I volunteered to be a member of the Trust Board. Part of the initial deed when Toi Ora was first set up included that the Board should have a percentage of members who had personal lived experience of Mental Health issues and were current members of Toi Ora. I was a part of the Board for several years, including as Chairperson until I stepped down as part of my maternity leave.

When one of the long-term tutors left, I was offered the role of art tutor for the beginners' painting class, initially as a shared position. I have also filled in tutoring other classes such as Mosaics, Printmaking and Creative Writing and worked as a tutor with groups of young people across various arts as part of the Express Yourself programme (this is not currently running anymore due to lack of available funding)

Over the years I have also has support and opportunities from Toi Ora in various forms. I have been part of group exhibitions and performances both at Toi Ora and other galleries/venues and was able to put together a solo exhibition in 2011. I have also been supported as a delegate to conferences, and supported in learning New Zealand Sign Language, as Toi Ora extended a welcome to the Deaf community with specific workshops and exhibitions.

When my now feisty two-year-old daughter was born, I took maternity leave as a tutor for a year, but during that time stayed in contact with the studio. I even attended a few

classes with my baby in tow, recognizing the importance for me of remaining connected with other adults and my own interests as I navigated to first year of my daughter's life and struggled with mild post-natal depression. I have since returned to tutoring one day a week.

During 2017 I also had the privilege of being a participant on the Be Leadership programme, a leadership programme set over 10 months including some residential components. Participants develop new frames of thinking around leadership through having new and challenging conversations with each other and prominent leaders throughout New Zealand. I was fortunate to be able to attend the programme with my baby (who was 4 months old at the start of the programme) and to be a part of discussions around accessibility for all.



# HOUSING ACCESSIBILITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

by NIKKI STOKES

When our landlord issued a 90 day notice of intent to take back occupation of the home my young family had been renting for two years, I did what most people in my generation have had to do at some point; I spent hours of my time desperately scouring real estate websites, publications and new paper listings in hopes of finding another home to rent at a time when demand significantly outstrips supply.

Unlike the majority of hopeful tenants, however, I dismissed most of the available properties without forwarding an application. Instead I went into the Ministry of Social Development and applied for social housing in hope they could make up for the lack of

private rental houses that would be even minimally accessible to my mobility impaired daughter.

I was advised to continue looking for private housing and to keep my daughter's disability a secret to prevent any discomfort from potential landlords. The wait time for social housing would be months, perhaps years, and emergency housing providers would unlikely be able or willing to accommodate a family with our requirements.

By luck we were able to secure a private rental and with some hefty funding for a temporary ramp, hoist system and fancy shower chair, the house was made minimally accessible to her basic care needs.



## Housing and erasure

While stories like this are seldom heard in the well chewed-over discussions on housing challenges and solutions, they are hardly isolated.

In October 2017 the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing presented a report on the right to adequate housing for persons with disabilities<sup>1</sup>. The report highlights the fact that globally, the right to adequate housing remains beyond reach for most persons with disability and that legislation and policy have generally ignored the need for action to protect the right to housing for disabled people.

For people with disabilities, being unable to access suitable and secure housing compromises the choices available to them within their communities. If housing cannot be secured, a person may be forced into living with family members beyond a time period that they feel is appropriate. If housing is not suitably accessible, or cannot be reasonably modified to enable independence, a person may find themselves reliant on disability support workers. If housing is not located convenient to community facilities, support, employment or reliable and accessible public transport, a person with disabilities may find themselves isolated and struggling to participate fully in society. This creates vulnerability as disabled people are forced into situations where they cannot fully exercise their human rights. and reinforces harmful narratives of the burden of disability on society.

In such a society disabled people are actively erased. While 2013 census data estimated that a total of 1.1 million people, or 24% of New Zealanders were disabled it is estimated that only 2% of our housing stock is accessible. As the United Nations report says: “Most housing and development is designed as if persons with disabilities do not exist, will not live there or deserve no consideration”.

While numerous organisations and consumer groups representing various disabled groups have highlighted the urgent need for minimum accessibility standards and action for access to adequate housing, little meaningful action has occurred at Government level. Housing accessibility is protected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>2</sup>, to which New Zealand is a signatory. It is therefore fundamental to our responsibilities to Disabled People that any future policy or initiatives intended to address housing be centred around ensuring a minimum level of accessibility.

## Is KiwiBuild accessible?

The term “universal design” was coined by the architect Ronald Mace to describe the concept of designing all products and the built environment to be aesthetic and usable to the greatest extent possible by everyone, regardless of their age, ability, or status in life<sup>3</sup>. When comparing the cost of incorporating Universal Design into new builds against the cost of retrofitting those same builds, it soon becomes clear that failure to ensure accessibility in housing policy and initiatives is not only creating undue hardship to persons with disability, but it is a poor economic choice in the longterm. According to the research, testing and consulting organisation BRANZ ([www.branz.co.nz](http://www.branz.co.nz)), building using concepts of Universal Design would add little additional cost (around \$3,000 per dwelling). Yet retrofitting a building that has not been built to an accessible standard may well cost over \$20,000.

The much-lauded KiwiBuild programme has made no assurances to or carried out consultation with any of the organisations representing disabled people. This seems at best counter productive to the purpose of state funded housing projects, and at worst a significant breach of Human Rights. A society that intends to be inclusive must begin with

<sup>1</sup> [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/72/128](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/72/128)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal\\_design](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_design)

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fully accessible communities, including access to housing for disabled people, and also “visitability” - the ability to access the homes of friends, family and community members to ensure full and uncompromised participation in society.

The costs of not building new homes or carrying out renovations to a minimum standard of accessibility are significant, and in New Zealand that cost falls upon our already very stretched Health system. Funding for modifications is difficult and time-consuming to access, has strict limits that place financial burdens on disabled people and their families, and is not accessible to people who are unable to secure stable long term accommodation.

Recently Phil Twyford, the Minister championing the Kiwibuild programme was invited to speak at the Universal Design Conference of 2018. While his speech conveyed his recognition of the challenges of access to housing to that disabled people face and a need to ensure a diversity of housing stock to meet a diversity of need and family structure, it is concerning that no firm commitment has been made to ensure that a minimum standard of accessibility will be applied to the Kiwibuild programme.

## **Community connections**

It was also announced in September this year that a new social housing development has been planned for Otara, incorporating features to meet the needs of disabled tenants. While 71 apartments have been planned for the development, only seven ground level apartments have been specifically planned to accommodate mobility impaired individuals. While there are many disabilities and needs beyond mobility impairment, this does not reflect that 14% of New Zealanders (over half of the disability community) have a mobility impairment.

Moreover, for people with disability, the ability to maintain connections with their communities and supports are vital. Creating separate communities for disabled people to exist in, rather than ensuring all housing

provides the ability to accommodate all disabilities, forces people with disabilities to be cut off from their supports, their communities and to remain invisible.

As a carer the strain of inadequate housing cannot be understated. It has created an ongoing cycle of instability and crisis for our family. The struggle to find adequate housing in our local community has forced us to sever ties with our support networks, deal with transfer and inconsistency of service provision and case management, feel frequently vulnerable and exposed having unfamiliar care staff coming into our home, and struggle to find inclusive social situations. The lack of access to fully accessible housing or to state funded modifications has required that my physical safety and the safety of my child be compromised in the process of providing basic care.

Leaving disabled people vulnerable and without choices, and placing additional strain on their families and carers by failing to ensure adequate housing, continues to result in terrible human rights abuses for people with disabilities. We have a responsibility and the capability to ensure that adequate and secure housing is an accessible right for all.





# AUCKLAND'S PUBLIC TRANSPORT: MORE OR LESS ACCESSIBLE?

By Daphne Lawless

Increasing the use of public transport – buses, trains, ferries and trams/light rail – and reducing reliance on private cars is recognized by most on the Left and centre as an essential part of the transition to a sustainable, post-capitalist future. Capitalism's devotion to private cars and the roading needed to make them usable has – as previous *Fightback* articles have explained<sup>1</sup> – contributed to the destruction of working-class and Pasefika communities in Auckland, as well as making large areas of land unusable for agriculture or housing. That's not even to mention the huge waste of resources and labour going into road-building, or the toll of deaths and injuries on our roads.

But consider the public transport you actually know in your city. Is it good enough to enable you to live life to the fullest? Or would you not be able to function in life if you didn't

have your own private car? The real goal of a public transport system should be to make working, living and playing *Accessible* to all citizens, whether they own a car or not – and whatever their physical or mental health, or their family needs. It doesn't seem an exaggeration to say that current (run-down, under-funded, inefficient) systems don't cut it – but what kind of changes do we need?

## Economic accessibility

Since the "Super-City" amalgamation of Auckland in 2010 – 1.5 million people under one council – many steps have been taken to throw 60 years of motorway madness into reverse gear. Some of the most significant have been electrified trains and recent rationalisation of our bus services into "New Networks". But is there a danger that improvements in public transport – and other recent reforms to housing and urban design, aiming for a more sustainable and liveable city – might end up becoming yet another public good "captured" by the already privileged – either socio-economically, or in

<sup>1</sup> See <https://fightback.org.nz/2015/02/13/urban-housing-is-an-ecosocialist-issue/> and <https://fightback.org.nz/2017/03/20/economic-apartheid-the-ongoing-ethnic-cleansing-of-central-auckland/>

terms of physical mobility?

The current Labour-led government recently granted a long-standing request for the Auckland Council to impose a fuel tax to pay for further public transport improvements. From a mainstream economic point of view, putting up the price of petrol is an efficient “polluter pays” system which not only earns money but gives an “economic signal” to people to not use their cars so much.

Unfortunately, driving less is simply not an option for many working people. Many will tell you that owning a private car is simply compulsory – it’s like a tax. Because of shift work or the location of many large work sites on the city fringes, public transport simply won’t get you there efficiently or reliably, and you’ll get fired. Then there’s the need to do shopping, take the kids to school or to sports, and so on.

These things are of course much simpler if you work an office job in the city and you’re able to live within walking/cycling distance of schools and shops. But – with Auckland’s property market out of control, to the benefit of those who gentrified the inner-city neighbourhoods in the 1980s – living somewhere you don’t need to own a car has become, paradoxically, a privilege of the mainly Pākehā middle classes.

As previously discussed, “economic apartheid” over the last 60 years has restricted working people, especially from migrant communities, to sprawling, auto-dependent outer suburbs. And the current property bubble only makes things worse. Worse still, it is these very privileged suburbs who have gotten the lion’s share of the benefits of recent transport improvements<sup>2</sup>:

Auckland’s public transport accessibility is performing “poorly”, a newly released report says. Using 2013 census data and 2015 public transport data it found Auckland’s network performance was significantly lower than Brisbane, Perth and Vancouver.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.stuff.co.nz/auckland/local-news/central-leader/100723290/auckland-ranks-lowest-in-public-transport-accessibility-out-of-sister-cities-study-finds>

Highest levels of accessibility tended to be centralised within Auckland, while its fringes, especially to the south and east, were worse off.

Accessibility was determined by a commuter’s ability to reach their workplace by bus, train or ferry within 30-minutes during peak morning traffic.

Low-income families tended to be confined to distant neighbourhoods with less public transport infrastructure, meaning they had fewer opportunities to find good jobs.

Greater Auckland editor Matthew Lowrie said Auckland’s public transport system had been largely focused on improving connections to the centre city, with the fringes seeing little improvement.

Auckland councillor Efeso Collins, from the working-class and multicultural Manukau ward, had this to say in a recent article:<sup>3</sup>

Due to low household incomes, my community doesn’t have the luxury of paying additional tax now, to benefit future generations. For those who are struggling to provide basic necessities for their whānau, further tax, no matter how well-intentioned in principle, can seem impossible...

Sam Warburton, an Economist and Research Fellow for The New Zealand Initiative... identified that less fuel-efficient cars are likely to be owned by low-income families. Sam makes specific mention of Māori and Pacific Island families who tend to own big vans and cars that are typically not fuel-efficient, which will result in a disproportionately high fuel tax contribution. From my experience growing up in Ōtara, I would absolutely agree with this sentiment.

User-pay schemes are fair in practice when users have alternative options at their disposal. If you live closer to

<sup>3</sup> <https://thespinoff.co.nz/auckland/15-05-2018/taxing-the-poor-to-transport-the-rich/>

centralised services, it might be a very easy choice to make, to ditch your private vehicle for a bus, train or even bike. Or, you might earn enough to barely notice the relatively small increase to your petrol costs and make the choice to continue to drive. However, this argument doesn't always stack-up when you consider the average Manukau commuter.

Public transport advocates in Auckland – such as those associated with the Greater Auckland lobby group – do not dismiss concerns like those raised by councillor Collins. But their main counterargument is that there is *no political alternative* to the fuel tax. Raising income taxes – or establishing a capital gains tax – are politically excluded under this centrist Coalition government which is terrified that those who are doing well out of the asset bubble will desert them at the ballot box. At the Auckland Council level, an increase in rates (property taxes) targeting the millionaire beneficiaries of the real estate bubble would seem fair – and would be just as politically impossible.

We are left, then, with an impossible choice – either we are stuck with the inefficient, unhealthy, polluting and deadly status quo; or we get already impoverished working people to pay for the improvements we need. Only if working people become *politically organized* so that our voices become as loud and as clearly heard as those of the gentrification millionaires of Herne Bay and Westmere will we be able to get out of this trap.

## Physical accessibility

Public transport is all the more necessary for those with special mobility needs, who would often have to pay for special adaptations to a private car to be able to use one. But – especially in cities with established public transport networks – massive investment is often needed to make it possible to make public transport physically accessible. For example, in Wellington, some ramps leading to train stations are too steep for wheelchairs – and upgrading them is “not a priority”.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/nine->

Auckland Transport has trumpeted that its “New Network” – being rolled out gradually over Auckland – will effectively deal with many of the problems of socio-economic accessibility mentioned above. By moving to a system where people transfer between buses or trains at major hubs – rather than taking long journeys on a single bus – they argue, much more frequent and useful bus services are possible to outer areas using equal or lesser resources.<sup>5</sup>

Although Auckland's New Network hasn't been as disastrous as the recent reorganization of bus services in Wellington<sup>6</sup>, it has attracted criticism precisely because of its reliance on transfers. Many of the complaints about the New Network have been about the need to cross busy roads to make transfers; or about the safety issues with having to wait at isolated bus stops after dark.<sup>7</sup> Issues of safety are, of course, accessibility issues in themselves, and reasons why the “steel box” of the private car might become more appealing.

We are therefore faced with the possibility that changes to public transport to make it more *economically* accessible might paradoxically reduce *physical* accessibility – if sufficient care is not taken with the details. One example of the possible blindness of Auckland Transport's leaders to these physical/safety accessibility issues was an infamous comment made by City Rail Link project director Chris Meale in an interview with *The Spinoff's* Simon Wilson, last year. Wilson wanted to know why the only entrance to the Karangahape Road underground train station would be some way down relatively steep Mercury Lane<sup>8</sup>:

I asked why there won't be escalators

[tonoon/audio/2018649430/para-cyclist-railway-ramps-too-steep](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tonoon/audio/2018649430/para-cyclist-railway-ramps-too-steep)

<sup>5</sup> <https://at.govt.nz/projects-roadworks/new-public-transport-network/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/107058407/how-did-transport-planners-get-wellingtons-new-bus-network-so-wrong>

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/auckland/106165364/our-safety-at-risk-bus-passengers-plea-to-auckland-transport> and [www.greeterauckland.org.nz/2018/07/11/is-auckland-transport-doing-enough-to-support-the-new-net/](http://www.greeterauckland.org.nz/2018/07/11/is-auckland-transport-doing-enough-to-support-the-new-net/)

<sup>8</sup> <https://thespinoff.co.nz/auckland/15-07-2017/the-big-dig-promises-and-problems-with-aucklands-city-rail-link/>



rising to Karangahape Rd itself.

“That’s not a difficult walk,” he said.  
“It’s good for you.”

Not difficult for him or me, perhaps,  
but moderately fit adults are not  
exactly the benchmark for ease of  
use.

Thankfully, the uproar about this comment seems to have shifted some thoughts and a second, more level entrance to the station is now planned.<sup>9</sup> But this – combined with Wellington’s ramp slope issues mentioned above – emphasise how much accessibility to public transport is not so much about the vehicles themselves, but about the “last mile problem” – actually being able to get to or from the stops and/or stations.

The New Zealand Transport Agency offers a service called “Total Mobility” which offers “subsidised licensed taxi services to people who have an impairment that prevents them” from using public transport safely or effectively, mostly because of the “last mile” problem.<sup>10</sup> However – as with many Government welfare initiatives – it is poorly advertised and many people who would benefit from this system don’t even know it exists, let alone how to apply for it.

## What is to be done?

Even though it was an initiative of the conservative-populist New Zealand First party, the “Super Gold Card” – guaranteeing free public transport to the over-65s – shows how socially beneficial such universal entitlements (without having to jump through the hoops of needs-testing) can be. Reducing the need for all elders to drive is good not only for their own health and safety, but for that of the wider community. It came as a shock to this writer to find out that there is no equivalent scheme for the physically impaired in this country – “Total Mobility” only offers a partial subsidy for public transport.

As this article has discussed, public transport must become both *physically* accessible (including safety at stops and stations) for all, as well as becoming *socio-economically* accessible. Socialists have long pushed “zero fares” as the simplest means of achieving the latter goal; but making public transport *useful* by providing more and better services for people living and working in the far-flung suburbs is surely equally important.

Some other ideas were suggested a few years ago in a discussion document from Australia’s Socialist Alliance<sup>11</sup>:

- Some people with disabilities need to be accompanied on public transport by an attendant, in which case the attendant should also be able to travel for free.
- Regularly retrain all customer service staff in the rights, needs and entitlements of all people with disabilities.
- Re-open all station toilet facilities and build new facilities on platforms and at tram/bus
- Test out all vehicle destination signs and other written information by running them past committees of vision-impaired and elderly passengers.
- Stop the misleading spin on accessible public transport and tell the truth about whether people with disabilities can easily access these vehicles without assistance, whether they really feel comfortable accessing these services, whether there is enough room for wheelchairs and guide dogs or enough assistance in using the services.
- Develop faster, more energy efficient, and more robust electric wheelchairs and scooters so that people with disabilities can make short trips without needing public transport or cars, and with less need to recharge or service their chairs.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.cityraillink.co.nz/stations-karangahape-rd/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.transport.govt.nz/land/the-total-mobility-scheme/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://socialist-alliance.org/alliance-voices/public-transport-access-people-disabilities>



# MARXISM AND AUTISM

by Janine Booth

There are different approaches to understanding autism. Perhaps the dominant approach is a medical one: seeing autism as a disease or tragedy, and autistic people as being broken and needing fixing. Over recent years, a more progressive approach has developed. It stresses acceptance of autistic people rather than simply “awareness”, and demands rights, equality and support rather than abusive “treatments”.

This approach is based on the concept of neurodiversity: the recognition that the

human species is neurologically diverse; that different people have different brain wiring. But this more progressive approach, while welcome, does not necessarily locate autism and neurodiversity within the social, economic and political structures of society. It is important to do this — firstly, because all disability exists in a social context; and secondly, because autism is largely an issue of how people interact socially. We are all expected to follow social rules, but who makes those social rules, and how?

## **The impact of capitalism on autistic lives**

Autism is an atypical neurology, an unusual brain wiring. Perhaps if the majority of the population is Windows, autistic people are Mac. This atypical neurology leads to atypical processing, cognitive functioning and communication, differences in social interaction and sensitivity to sensory inputs such as sound or light.

When capitalism became the established system, it brought development, knowledge, understanding, scientific enquiry, and the potential of providing more support for people. It accelerated production. It was a big improvement on what came before it. However, it also increased — and still increases — social pressure. It brings people together in a much more intense way, and puts a premium on how “good” you are socially.

Capitalism also increases light, noise and other sensory stimulation. For autistic people, modern capitalism is both developed and distressing. It brings huge advantages, great potential, but it also brings great distress. When we talk about autistic people being disabled, we mean that capitalism disables autistic people.

## **Explaining increasing diagnoses**

There has been a significant increase in autism diagnosis over recent years. Why? Some who take a medical model approach explain it as an epidemic. A graphic circulated in the US declares: 10 years ago, 1 in 1000; 5 years ago, 1 in 500; today 1 in 88; and asks “scared yet?” I am more scared of the thinking behind that graphic than I am of the increasing recognition of the prevalence of autism.

The more progressive and accurate explanation is that rather than the prevalence of autism increasing, it is our recognition of it that is growing: society has an increased awareness of autism; there is a greater availability of diagnosis; and the criteria for diagnosing autism have been steadily

widened over the years.

We can go further than this. The increasing social pressure that capitalism places on people, the increasing sensory overload that it throws at us, is causing more and more distress, so more and more autistic people are seeking diagnosis in order to access help. Society and its autistic members are coming into conflict with each other more and more. A lot of autistic people get their autism diagnosis having initially sought help for a mental health problem such as anxiety or depression.

## **Charity?**

Often you are expected to turn to charities when there is no public support available. But although some autism charities do provide some useful services, they play a negative role too. They reinforce the view of autistic people as objects of pity, often using patronising imagery to attract donations. They are rarely led by autistic people, and they don’t always stand on the same side as those of us fighting for liberation.

The misnamed US charity Autism Speaks promotes horrendous negative views of autism as a “tragedy”, and is regularly picketed by autistic activists. In the UK, the National Autistic Society is not nearly as bad, but it has an unacceptably wide pay gap between its senior managers and its support workers, and in 2013/14 it provoked teaching unions to strike by expecting teachers in its schools to work for lower pay than nationally-agreed rates for teachers in mainstream state schools.

## **Autism, neurodiversity, and production**

In any Marxist analysis, it is important to look at the exploitation of labour. Autistic people are disadvantaged in employment. These statistics are for the UK, but the situation is similar elsewhere:

- 43% of autistic adults have left or lost a job because of their condition
- 41% of autistic adults over 55 have spent



over 10 years without a paid job

- 37% of autistic adults have never been in paid employment after the age of 16
- 15% of autistic adults are in full-time employment

Under the pretext of the economic crisis, employers have waged an offensive, with high-pressure management techniques and insecure employment. The rise of short-term contracts, unpredictable working hours and zero-hours contracts has a detrimental effect on all workers — but if you have an autistic mindset, and rely on predictability and routine, the impact can be even worse.

We have also seen a shift towards “customer service”, towards “soft” or “social” skills being valued above technical skills, even in quite technical industries such as public transport. We have seen public services commodified, with service users now seen as “customers”.

This can cause problems for people whose focus is their technical ability at the job rather than on narrowly-defined social skills. But alongside that, we have seen employers making more effort to recruit and accommodate autistic workers. While that is welcome, sometimes those employers let slip that one of their reasons is that they see the potential to exploit autistic people.

They talk about how much more productive certain autistic people may be, and how they are less likely to be distracted by social gossip. They may well be “cherry-picking” those autistic workers with the highest level of skill and the lowest level of support need. Such employers are commodifying autistic people’s talents rather than valuing them.

## Workers’ control

Work under capitalism is highly regimented, in its pace, its methods, its processes and its targets. Work provides very little or no scope or flexibility for people who think differently and who want to do things in a different way.

Crucial to winning a better future for autistic people, particularly in the area of work, is to change work not workers. There is plenty

of advice available to autistic people on how to get or keep a job, but most of it is based around how to change ourselves to impress the employer and to “fit in” at work — basically, how to act like you are not autistic.

Far better than that would be for work itself to change, with the work environment, the pace and methods of work made more accessible to people whatever their brain wiring. Central to that is the idea of workers’ control: both individually and collectively, workers having control over, for example, the sensory environment in the workplace and how the job is done.

## The political economy of autism

Karl Marx wrote about “the political economy of the working class”, meaning the working class fighting for laws and policies that benefit us even if that is costly to capitalism. If we wrote a list of the changes we want in order to achieve equality for autistic people, then the bill for capitalism might be quite hefty.

But that’s just tough — we want those changes, those measures to alleviate distress, to stop discrimination and exclusion. We want to advance equality, regardless of the cost to the existing capitalist system.

This opens up the discussion of what sort of society we are fighting for. What will socialism look like? How will it acknowledge and accept neurological diversity in a way that capitalism does not?

*Edited version of article originally published at <https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2017-07-26/marxism-and-autism>*



# IN DEFENCE OF MEDS (AND NEUROCHEMISTRY): NOTES FROM A BIPOLAR SOCIALIST

by Ani White

**Content warning:** This article discusses a range of mental health conditions, including bipolar and suicidality.

**Bipolar (definition):** A mental condition characterised by depression and mania.

**Mania (definition):** An abnormally elevated mood state characterized by such symptoms as inappropriate elation, increased irritability, severe insomnia, grandiose notions, increased speed and/or volume of speech, disconnected and racing thoughts, increased sexual desire, markedly increased energy and activity level, poor judgment, and inappropriate social behavior.<sup>1</sup>

“...depression isn’t about brain chemistry at all, it’s about social context.” This turn of phrase, coming from a friend over dinner, set off immediate alarm bells. *At all?* Isn’t that simplistic? Surely brain chemistry and social context interact? My friend was recommending some fellow published in The Guardian, so while arguing back I agreed to look into it.

In the article<sup>2</sup>, author Johann Hari does actually acknowledge briefly that brain chemistry is a factor, and that medication can help, but strongly emphasises that improving peoples’ social conditions is necessary to

alleviate depression and anxiety. I agree with all of this. High rates of mental distress in our society result from a brutally exploitative system that alienates us from ourselves, and a kinder (socialist!) society would result in better mental health outcomes. My point here isn’t about Hari, the ethics of his behaviour<sup>3</sup>, or the details of his work (I should admit upfront to not having read his book, only the article). It’s about the popularity of his work, and the dangers associated with a simplified interpretation of it. I should also acknowledge that friends of mine with bipolar and borderline personality disorder find Hari’s

work useful, so this is not intended to speak for all bipolar people.

However, I personally believe that what Hari says is most accurate and pertinent for people suffering from *situational* depression and anxiety. We should be careful about extending Hari’s arguments too far. They should not be blindly mapped onto all mental conditions. And I don’t accept that *all mental illness is socially determined* – Hari does not argue this, but it’s a common leftist outlook that Hari might appear superficially to confirm.

I’m bipolar (see byline for definition). One of my uncles experienced schizophrenia and committed suicide, another uncle experiences bipolar, my sister has experienced hypomania and depression. The evidence seems clear that bipolar is heritable,<sup>4</sup> and given my family history it seems pretty likely my bipolar is inherited. This doesn’t mean social context is irrelevant: changes in my life have helped trigger my manic episodes for example. However, the phrase “depression isn’t about brain chemistry at all” isn’t useful for my situation, including my depressed periods. My brain *does* chemically have a greater tendency towards ‘imbalances’ than other brains, and my treatment has to acknowledge that. It’s common that bipolar is initially misdiagnosed as simply depression/anxiety, leading to treatment that can make the situation worse: for example, antidepressants can set off mania, as they did in my case. Our brains are simply not like other brains (this is not distinct to bipolar people – patterns in brain chemistry vary widely).

My bipolar diagnosis made a big difference to recovery, enabling a more appropriate treatment plan (including appropriate meds, talk therapy, and broader changes in my life). After 28 years with undiagnosed bipolar, the 2 years since my diagnosis have been marked by significant recovery. Over that time, I’ve also found that while many people are aware of how depression works, mania (again, see byline) is not widely understood.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=4271>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jan/07/is-every-thing-you-think-you-know-about-depression-wrong-johann-hari-lost-connections>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.economist.com/bagehots-note-book/2011/09/15/the-depressing-tale-of-johann-hari>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.medscape.org/viewarticle/489331>



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Mental health advocates around the world have launched a number of prominent depression awareness campaigns. Depression is a common issue: about 15% of Australians will suffer from depression, compared to about 1.8% experiencing bipolar. With overstretched and underfunded mental health systems, there are inestimable challenges facing mental health advocates, and raising awareness of the most common mental health disorders does make sense as a priority. However, people with rarer mental health conditions exist, and our conditions remain widely misunderstood.

Reactions to Kanye West are a case in point (hear me out). The recent announcement of his bipolar diagnosis did not surprise me at all. What's notable, unusual about Kanye's manic episodes is that they're broadcast across the world. Every manic person embarrasses themselves, most do not do it on the evening news. Kanye's episodes are otherwise quite typical of mania: delusions of grandeur, ranting, a general disconnection from the social body. I do not mean to excuse everything Kanye has said, particularly his endorsement of the alt right. Kanye has millions of dollars, not something most bipolar people can claim, so this probably factors into some of the disconnected ideas he expresses. Bipolar people must take responsibility; I myself have fucked up, behaving inappropriately while manic. Manic people may lack filters, but the ideas we express do come from our brains.

However, it seems to me that many who would not mock a celebrity's depression will mock a celebrity's manic behaviour. In a mental health support group online, I saw a comment dismissing Kanye as on the 'delusion train.' It struck me as unlikely that anyone in that space would dismiss someone on the 'depression train' (even a multi-millionaire such as Robin Williams).

In my experience, even those who do not mock manic delusions understandably find them confusing. This is not just because the ideas manic people express are confusing, though they often are; it's also that there is no script for dealing with these episodes the

way there is for depression.

During a video posted on Facebook, Johann Hari repeatedly emphasised that "you're not crazy." This is affirming for many. However, I prefer to acknowledge that manic episodes *are* crazy. They involve delusions, incoherence, reckless behaviour. For some of us, it may be more useful to acknowledge that insanity is part of the spectrum of human behaviour than to imply that nobody is crazy. Perhaps talk of 'insanity' is stigmatising, and I don't insist everyone use it; my point is more that we need to be frank about the realities of mania.

Brains will always be diverse. This may manifest as mood imbalances. Moods and perceptions would not all be stable and identical under socialism. It may be that periods of lower energy and mood – what we call depression – would be accepted, not punished as 'unproductive', a punitive approach that only exacerbates depressive spirals. In other words, yes, mental distress would be alleviated, likely leading to lower rates of depression and anxiety. But this would not mean the eradication of complex, varied, sometimes 'imbalanced' brains – and meds would likely continue to help.

Perhaps a defence of neurochemistry and medication is unnecessary; meds continue to be the mental health system's first port of call. However, my concern is that those who rightly call attention to social context do not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

# CREATING SPACE FOR KIDS IN OUR MOVEMENTS

by Vikki Law



Despite rhetoric about mutual aid and creating new worlds, social justice movements across the US and Canada often neglect the needs of caregivers and children. This has had the effect of excluding crucial organizers and reducing our ability to raise the next generation to be a part of our movements.

Many movements—and the individuals within them—continue to gender parenting as women's work and devalue its importance. The work of childrearing continues to be devalued, leading to an absence of community support that disproportionately impacts mothers who are already marginalized in larger society, i.e. mothers who are low-income, single, undocumented, gender non-conforming, and/or of color.

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## Safe childcare

Many issues arise when discussing both caregiving and consideration for caregivers in social justice movements. One concern that mothers expressed again and again was the need for safe childcare so that they could fully engage in the tasks and discussions at hand.

Lack of consideration around children and caregiving often manifests as a lack of childcare at events and conferences.

“We’ve witnessed the failure on the part of too many conference organizers (from the most recent US Social Forum where there was a lack of planning, to Left Forum where there was no childcare at all) to think about the needs of parents and children until the last minute,” note members of Kidz’ City, an anarchy-feminist childcare collective in Baltimore. “Neglecting to think about it until the need presents itself is perpetuating the systematic neglect of the needs of parents and children.”

When childcare is provided, it is often not given the same serious attention as other event logistics. Organizers often fail to consider that places acceptable for able-bodied adults are unsuitable—if not unsafe—for babies and small children.

“I find that movement spaces tend to be unfriendly to mobile children (in that they are dirty and often dangerous), and that folks, when booking spaces for events/trainings, don’t think about how the space/environment impacts me and my child even if I have given them advance notice that I will be there with an infant,” states Autumn, an anarchist mother and consensus process trainer.

Even when the childcare space is not dirty or unsafe, it is often inadequate in other ways. Another mother noted, “People think a childcare space is just going to be a room with crayons and the child is going to spend the whole day in there.”

Parents, caregivers, and children often have ideas about including families in ways that do not place the brunt of the responsibility on the parents themselves. “I think the continued effort on the national scene of offering childcare spaces and family-friendly events does a lot. If folks know that these resources are available, they may be more likely to attend. I like when it’s announced in meetings or gatherings that babies and baby noises are not only okay, but welcome,” suggests Connie. “I realize it can make it a little stressful, but to not exclude parents is a big deal to many of us.”

Even when organizers attempt to include families, those with special needs often remain neglected. Elizabeth notes that people shy away from trying to accommodate her older son, who has autism. “I think people are scared when they hear special needs or autism and [think] they won’t be able to handle it. Or they don’t look [for resources]. For conferences that happen on campuses, just call the education department. There’s got to be someone who’s a special education major. This could be like lab time for this person!”

## Engaging children

Gretchen, a mother of two, recognizes that including families involves engaging children in the issues:

We organize a lot of events for ourselves as adults, but we hardly ever organize events for kids... Just like we do presentations, workshops, events, [we should] have something for kids. It doesn’t have to be exclusively for kids...like there was this puppet troupe in Montreal who were doing an adaptation of the Paris Commune...they could have done the same thing as a way to tell the story for kids.

For Gretchen, engaging children and youth at events simply requires only a little more thinking and preparation. “I can think of lots of speakers who could really engage young people,” she says.



They could do a presentation that has a ten- to fifteen-year-old sitting on their edge of their seat thinking, 'Wow, this is an amazing talk. I like this.' Like slideshows, short films, whatever. That kind of stuff, I feel, is missing. We value that so much in our adult life...but then there's no organized radical series of events [for kids].

Some radical events have made a point to include children's activities. The Montreal Anarchist Bookfair includes a Kids' Program in addition to its adult workshops. That inspired China, an anarchist mother of an adult daughter, to approach the organizers of the 2006 Mid-Atlantic Radical Bookfair in Baltimore about offering childcare. She initially met with resistance but by the end of the meeting, the organizers agreed to allow her to set up childcare. Kidz' Corner included activities reflecting some of the social justice themes of the bookfair, such as radical storytime and a children's march.

In 2009, China, along with two childless anarchy-feminists, organized Kidz' City, the children's program for Baltimore's City from Below conference. These efforts grew into Kidz' City, a radical childcare collective.

The Allied Media Conference also has a Kids' Track for the children of attendees. In addition, the 2009 conference program included a list of ways that attendees could make the conference child-friendly. "I think every event that purports to be kid-friendly should have a similar educational document about exactly what that means," says Autumn.

Many mothers observed the absence of other parents and children in their political projects.

"I am interested in raising a continuum baby. I want to strap the baby on and carry him with me as many places as possible and combat the notion that children belong in separate spaces," Autumn states. "I felt from early on that part of the transformation I wanted to work towards, part of that work, was

including my children in all parts of my life, not repeating this same cultural mistake (I think) of keeping children in separate spaces until they are adults, then unleashing them upon the world with the expectation that they can be responsible adults."

## Kids' leadership

Over time, children who have been included in political events are inspired to create their own activities at other events.

By age seven, my daughter Siu Loong was already a veteran of radical childcare (including the Kids' Track and Kidz' City). Before attending a conference last fall, I warned her that, because childcare had been left until the last minute, it might be boring. Indignant, Siu Loong (then age nine) exclaimed, "This childcare isn't going to be boring!"

She then drew up a schedule for the weekend. While some activities did not happen (anarchist kickball replaced zine making and reading times), others (such as doll-making and visiting the community library) did. Had my daughter not experienced child-inclusive programming at previous events, she would not have had the skills and know-how to take on the task of creating activities for herself and the other children who attended.

"It would be great to have more political organizing that revolved around 'families' as a population/demographic," Autumn declares. "If radical organizers forced themselves to acknowledge that most of the people they wish to organize are members of families, they would have to rethink everything: how events are organized, how campaigns are run, who is brought to the table, etc."

*Edited version of article originally published at <http://www.leftturn.org/creating-space-kids-our-movements>*

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# HELEN KELLER: SOCIALISM AND DISABILITY

by Keith Rosenthal



Helen Keller is one of the most widely recognized figures in US history that people actually know very little about. That she was a serious political thinker who made important contributions in the fields of socialist theory and practice, or that she was a pioneer in pointing the way toward a Marxist understanding of disability oppression and liberation—this reality has been overlooked and censored.

When the story of Helen Keller is taught in schools today, it is frequently used to convey a number of anodyne “moral lessons” or messages: There is no personal obstacle that cannot be overcome through pluck and hard work; whatever problems one thinks they have pale in comparison to those of Helen Keller; and perhaps the most insidious of such messages, the one aimed primarily at people with disabilities themselves, is that the task of becoming a full member of society rests upon one’s individual efforts to overcome a given impairment and has nothing to do with structural oppression or inequality.

Ironically, this construction of the iconic, or mythological, Helen Keller has resulted in numerous essays and books written by individuals with disabilities who recount growing up feeling deeply resentful of her. They saw Keller as an impossibly perfect individual who personally overcame all limitations in order to become a world-famous figure—someone who pulled herself up by her bootstraps, so to speak, and did so with a polite smile. In reality, such a narrative starkly contradicts the experiences of the vast majority of people with disabilities, then and now, who endure incredibly high rates of poverty, homelessness, discrimination, police brutality, and ostracism.

## The radicalization of Helen Keller

Helen Keller was born in 1880 in Alabama to an upper-class family. Her father had been a slave-owner before the Civil War in which he had served as a commanding Confederate officer. After the war, he became the editor of a major newspaper in Alabama. Keller’s mother hailed from a wealthy and connected New England family.

When Helen Keller was two years old she became permanently deaf and blind as the result of an unknown illness. It was not until she was seven years old that she began her formal education under Anne Sullivan, a twenty-one-year-old graduate of the Perkins School for the Blind, who had been hired by the Kellers as a live-in tutor.

Keller’s education proceeded rapidly under Sullivan’s guidance, and her development soon gained attention from increasingly far-flung quarters. When she enrolled in a college preparatory school with seeing and hearing girls in 1896, newspapers around the country—and even the world—ran articles detailing her course loads, semester grades, and attendance records. Her every move became the subject of intense scrutiny and gossip. By the time she had graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Radcliffe College in 1904, Keller had become something of a global celebrity.

Then, in 1908, Helen Keller took the seemingly unlikely step of joining the American Socialist Party (SP). She cites two major factors that led her to this: First, her widespread readings on society and philosophy, which had ultimately led her to the works of Karl Marx as well as those of contemporary socialists, such as H. G. Wells, William Morris, and Eugene Debs; and second, her growing interest in studying the specific conditions of people with disabilities in the United States, which led her to draw conclusions about society that dovetailed with the former.

She noticed that the leading causes of disability in the United States were largely attributable to industrial and workplace accidents and diseases, frequently caused by an employer’s greed and reluctance to prioritize workers’ safety lest it diminish profits. She found that other social factors contributed, too, such as the prevalence of poverty, unequal access to medicine, overcrowded and unsanitary slums, and an officially imposed societal ignorance regarding matters of reproductive and sexual health.

She discovered that, once disabled, such individuals constituted a class who “as a rule are poor,” cast aside and forgotten. They were thrown into institutions; mired in poverty and unemployment; cut off from educational opportunities; and segregated and marginalized at every turn. There was not a single census in any state or city of the country that even kept track of the numbers



and needs of the disabled population. They simply did not exist as far as the powers-that-be were concerned.

In short, she had come to conclude that “our worst foes are ignorance, poverty, and the unconscious cruelty of our commercial society. These are the causes of blindness; these are the enemies which destroy the sight of children and workmen and undermine the health of mankind.”

## **The socialism of Helen Keller**

After Keller had made the decision to commit herself to socialism, she quickly became a leading figure in the movement. In fact, many recognized her as one of the most dedicated and effective propagandists of the socialist cause. She wrote regular columns in the Socialist Party press; she went on nonstop lecture tours across the country; she supported and popularized all the major strikes and industrial battles of the day. Later, when she grew increasingly despairing of what she deemed to be the Socialist Party’s conservative, electoral-based reformism, she became a steadfast proponent of the efforts of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which advocated for the organization of an explicitly revolutionary labor movement.

Originally, Keller’s entrance into the socialist movement had more or less coincided with her rise as a leading figure in the fight for women’s rights. She participated in marches and protests for women’s suffrage. She supported efforts to legalize birth control and abortion. She countered the prevailing male supremacist notion that women were biologically or necessarily subordinate to men by asserting simply, “The inferiority of women is man-made.” In sum, she advocated the complete equality of women in all fields economic, political, and social.

The fight for women’s suffrage was not particularly controversial within the Socialist Party (SP), which had long championed the cause. But around other forms of oppression, Keller was markedly in advance of the SP mainstream. The party had no official policy of combating the racial segregation and

inequality that pervaded US society generally and the labor movement in particular.

In contrast, Keller, along with a handful of other SP figures, maintained an early and life-long principled opposition to all forms of racial segregation, prejudice, and inequality. Keller became an outspoken supporter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), whose cofounder W. E. B. Du Bois she had known since childhood. Even well into her elder years, Keller participated in meetings and protests against racism as part of the nascent civil rights movement of the 1940s and 1950s.

While Keller found a receptive audience for her political writings in the socialist press, the response of the capitalist press was near-unanimously hostile. Sometimes, as demonstrated in the previously cited examples, the press denounced her as a stooge, ingrate, or imbecile, whose disability nullified her right to speak on political matters. Most often, however, they simply ignored and censored her. They refused to publish her articles, speeches, and letters to the editor on such subjects. Editors who had previously fawned over her now wanted nothing to do with her.

Sadly, the fundamental dream that Helen Keller maintained throughout most of her life ultimately eluded the grasp of her generation. In the years since her death, that dream—the dream of a socialist world, free of oppression, exploitation, and war—has likewise been deferred for subsequent generations. And yet, that dream has not died, and will not die as long as there are people in the world who remain animated by the memories and legacies of Helen Keller and all of our other fighting ancestors.

*Edited version of article originally published at <https://isreview.org/issue/96/politics-helen-keller>*

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